

Anton Chekhov

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WHITE STAR

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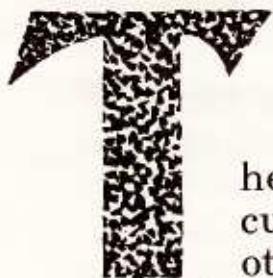
Anton Chekhov



WHITE STAR

*Drawings by N. Gharushin
Translated by Michelle MacGrath*





he hungry she-wolf got up to go hunting. Her three cubs were fast asleep, huddled up close to keep each other warm. She licked them over and set off.

Although it was March, at night the trees cracked with the cold as they do in December and the frost bit your tongue sharply the moment you stuck it out. The she-wolf was sickly and suspected everything. She started at the slightest sound and worried the whole time that her cubs might come to some harm while she was away. She was frightened by the scent of humans and horses, by the tree stumps, the piles of firewood and the dark road covered with horse dung, and she thought she could see people standing behind trees in the darkness and hear dogs barking on the edge of the forest.

She was old now and her sense of smell was less sharp than it used to be so that she sometimes mistook a fox's trail for that of a dog and occasionally she was totally wrong and even lost her way, something she'd never done in her youth.

Since she was so weak she never hunted calves or large rams now as she had done before and always avoided mares grazing with their foals, eating nothing but carrion. She rarely had the chance of eating fresh meat, only in the spring when she sometimes came across a she-hare and could take away her young or if she got into one of the byres where the farmers kept their lambs.

There was a winter hut standing by the main road a few miles from her lair. Ignat, an old watchman of about seventy, who coughed and talked to himself the whole time lived there. He usually slept all night and during the day wandered through the forest with his single-barrelled gun and whistled at hares. He must have been an engine-driver at sometime in his life because whenever he wanted to stop he'd shout out the order: "Brakes!" and then "More steam!" when he wanted to start again. He had a huge black mongrel dog called Arapka living with him. Whenever it ran too far

in front Ignat would call out "Reverse!" Sometimes he sang, swaying violently the whole time and frequently falling over (the she-wolf thought it was the wind that had blown him down) when he would cry, "Derailed!"

The she-wolf recalled that in the summer and autumn there had been a ram and two ewes grazing outside the hut and that when she had run by a few days earlier she thought she could hear bleating in the byre. On her way to the hut now she was busy calculating that it was already March and that this was the time when there were sure to be some lambs in the byre. She was tormented by hunger and imagined how she was going to sink her teeth into a lamb. Her mouth watered at the very thought and her eyes gleamed in the dark like two little lights.



Ignat's shed, byre and well were surrounded by deep snow-drifts. All was quiet. Arapka must have been asleep under the shed.

The she-wolf jumped up onto the byre from a snow-drift and started tearing at the straw roof with her paws and teeth. The straw was so soft and rotten that she nearly fell through. A wave of warm steam and the smell of manure and ewe's milk hit her in the face. Below her a lamb felt the cold air and started to bleat gently. Springing through the hole, the she-wolf fell and landed with her front legs and breast on something soft and warm which she took for a ram. At that moment something suddenly started to yelp and bark furiously in a thin, whining voice and the sheep rushed to the walls of the byre. Terrified, the she-wolf seized the first thing her teeth could find and fled...

She ran straining every muscle whilst Arapka, who had got scent of the wolf, howled wildly. The terrified hens clucked in the hut and Ignat went out onto his porch shouting, "More steam! Blow the whistle!" He hooted like an engine "Whoo-oo-whoo-oo!" and the whole hullabaloo echoed round the forest.

When the noise had gradually died down the she-wolf felt a little calmer and started to notice that the prey she had sunk her teeth in and was now dragging across the snow was heavier and somehow firmer than lambs usually are at that time of year. It smelt somehow different, too, and was making strange noises. She had stopped and put her burden down on the snow to have a rest and start her supper when she suddenly jumped back in disgust. It was a puppy, not a lamb, a black puppy with a big head and long legs, evidently a large breed, with a white star on its forehead, just like Arapka. Judging from the way he was behaving he was an uncouth little fellow, a common mongrel. He licked the loose folds of the scruff of his neck and started to wag his tail and bark at the she-wolf as if nothing had happened. She began snarling like a dog and ran away. The puppy followed. She looked round and snapped her teeth. He stopped in bewilder-



ment. Assuming she must be just playing, he stretched out his muzzle towards the winter hut and burst into ringing, joyous barks as though inviting his mother, Arapka, to join in the game with the she-wolf.

It was already getting light when the she-wolf returned home through the dense aspen wood and she could clearly make out each separate tree-trunk. Grouse were already awake, disturbed by the puppy's wild jumping and barking and the beautiful cock birds kept rising into the air.

"Whyever is he running after me?" the she-wolf thought in annoyance. "He probably wants me to eat him up."

She lived with her cubs in a shallow hollow that had



been left three years earlier when a tall old pine tree had been uprooted in a violent storm. The floor of the hollow was now lined with old leaves and moss and strewn with bones and bulls' horns the young cubs played with. They were already awake and all three of them, each looking very like the other, stood in a row on the edge of the hollow wagging their tails and gazing at their mother who had just returned. The puppy stopped a little way off when he caught sight of them and stared at them for a long time. Noticing that they were also taking a very careful look at him, he started barking at them angrily as at strangers.

It was light by this time, the sun had risen, the snow was

sparkling all around and the puppy continued to stand a little way off, barking. The cubs sucked at their mother, punching her scraggy belly with their paws while she chewed a dry white horse's bone. She was tormented by hunger, the puppy's barking had made her head pound and she felt like throwing herself on the uninvited guest and tearing him to pieces.

At last the puppy stopped barking, hoarse and tired; seeing that none was afraid of him or even paid him any attention, he started to go timidly up to the cubs, alternately crouching down and jumping up. He could be seen quite clearly now that it was daylight. He had a large white forehead with the sort of bump that only very stupid dogs have. His eyes were small, blue and dull and his overall expression was one of extreme stupidity. Approaching the cubs, he stretched out his ungainly paws, put his muzzle on them and began to whine: "Mnya-mnya-nga-nga-nga!"

Although the cubs didn't understand anything, they started wagging their tails. Then the puppy cuffed one of the cubs on his big head. The cub returned the blow. The puppy turned and gave him a sidelong glance, wagged his tail, dashed off and made small circles on the hard snow. The cubs chased after him and he rolled over on his back with his legs sticking up in the air. The three of them fell on him and, whining with delight, started biting him, just in fun and not very hard. The crows sitting up high in a pine tree looked down anxiously at the fight. The scene grew noisy and merry. The sun was blazing down with the strength of spring now; a constant stream of grouse, flashing emerald in the sunshine, flew over the pine laid low by the storm.

She-wolves usually train their young to hunt by letting them play with the prey. And now, watching the cubs chase the puppy over the frozen snow and attack him, the she-wolf thought, "Let them get used to things."

When they'd had enough of playing the cubs went into the hollow and fell asleep. The puppy howled a little from

hunger and then he, too, stretched out in the sun. When they woke up they resumed their game.

All that day and into the evening the she-wolf recalled how she'd heard a lamb bleat and smelt ewe's milk in the byre the night before. She snapped her teeth in hunger the whole time and went on gnawing greedily at the old bone, imagining it was a lamb. The cubs sucked at their mother's belly while the puppy, who was also very hungry, ran around them, sniffing at the snow.

"I'll eat him," the she-wolf decided. She went up to him and he licked her muzzle and started to whimper, thinking she wanted to play. She'd eaten dogs in the past, but the puppy had a strong doggy smell and because of her weakness she couldn't bear it now. She felt disgusted and moved away.

It grew cold as night fell. The puppy got bored and went home.

When the cubs were fast asleep the she-wolf set out hunting again. As on the previous night, she started anxiously at the slightest sound and was frightened by the



tree stumps, the firewood and the dark, isolated juniper bushes that from a distance looked like people. She ran on the frozen snow beside the road. Suddenly she caught a glimpse of something dark a long way in front of her. She pricked up her ears and strained her eyes: there really was something walking along in front of her. She could even hear its measured tread. Could it be a badger? Scarcely breathing and being careful to keep her distance, she skirted around the dark patch, looked back and saw what it was: the puppy with the white star on his forehead was walking slowly back home to the winter hut.

"I hope he's not going to get in my way again," the she-wolf thought and ran on quickly.

The hut was close now. She scrambled up onto the byre from the snow-drift. The hole she had made on the previous night had already been repaired with spring thatch and two new beams were stretched along the roof. She began burrowing away quickly with her legs and muzzle, glancing round to see if the puppy was approaching. She had just felt the wave of warm steam and caught the scent of manure when she heard a joyful bubbling bark behind her. The puppy had got back home. He sprang up beside the she-wolf on the roof and then through the hole. Feeling himself at home and recognising his sheep in the warm, he started barking louder still. Arapka, who was asleep under the shed, woke up and, catching the wolf's scent, started howling. The chickens began clucking and by the time Ignat appeared with his single-barrelled shotgun, the terrified she-wolf was already a long way off.

"Toot-toot!" Ignat whistled, "Throttle full on!" He pulled the trigger. The gun misfired; he tried again and the gun misfired again; he pulled the trigger for a third time and a huge cone of fire flew out of the barrel with a deafening "Boom-boom!" The butt hit him hard in the shoulder and, taking his gun in one hand and his axe in the other, he went to see what had caused the noise.

A little later he returned to the hut. "What was that?" a



chance wanderer, who was spending the night in Ignat's hut and who had been woken up by the noise, asked in a hoarse voice.

"Nothing," the old man replied. "Nothing important! Our White Star had got into the habit of sleeping in the warm with the sheep, only he doesn't think of going in through the door and keeps trying to get in through the roof. He tore a hole in it the other night and went off, the little devil, and now he's come back and has done the same again."

"Stupid creature."

"He's certainly got a screw loose somewhere. Goodness, I hate stupidity," Ignat said with a sigh, climbing up onto the stove. "Well, it's too early to get up, so let's go back to sleep with the throttle open."

And in the morning he called White Star to him, tweaked his ears roughly and then beat him with a stick, saying over and over again: "Use the door in future! Use the door!"







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